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# Doreen Massey on Space

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**David Edmonds:** *Doreen Massey has made her reputation by studying space, not outer space, space here on planet Earth. Professor Massey is a geographer who wants us to rethink many of our assumptions about space, including the assumption that it is simply something we pass through. She believes that an analysis of spatial relations between, for example, people, cities, jobs, is key to an understanding of politics and power.*

**Nigel Warburton:** *Doreen Massey welcome to Social Science Bites.*

**Doreen Massey:** Hello. Thank you.

**Nigel Warburton:** *The topic we are going to focus on is space. Now, some people might think that that's a topic for physicists or architects, why is it a topic for geographers?*

**Doreen Massey:** I think the immediate way to respond is that if history is about time, geography is about space. What I do in geography is not space meaning 'outer space', or space meaning 'atomic space', or any of that; it is space as that dimension of the world in which we live. Whereas historians concentrate on the temporal dimension, how things change over time; what geographers concentrate on is the way in which things are arranged- we would often say 'geographically', - I'm here saying 'over space.'

**Nigel Warburton:** *So, in your own work about space what do you focus on?*

**Doreen Massey:** Right, well one of the things in the sense was anger: I got really annoyed with the rest of the social sciences, and indeed with philosophers, paying so much attention to time. And space became a kind of residual dimension: it's always 'time and space'. So time is the dimension of change, and of dynamism, and of the life we live, and all the rest of it; and space became the dimension that wasn't all of that. And a lot of us, I think, implicitly think of space as a kind of flat surface out there -we 'cross space' - and space is therefore devoid of temporality: it is without time, it is without dynamism, it is a kind of flat, inert given. Foucault wrote in the later part of his life that, yes, he thought we'd often been thinking of space like that and that was wrong, and I agree with Foucault in that later moment.

A lot of what I've been trying to do over the all too many years when I've been writing about space is to bring space alive, to dynamize it and to make it relevant, to emphasize how important space is in the lives in which we live, and in the organization of the societies in which we live. Most obviously I would say that space is not a flat surface across which we walk; Raymond Williams talked about this: you're taking a train across the landscape – you're not traveling across a dead flat surface that is space: you're cutting across a myriad of stories going on. So instead of space being this flat surface it's like a pincushion of a million stories: if you stop at any point in that walk there will be a house with a story. Raymond Williams spoke about looking out of a train window and there was this woman clearing the grate, and he speeds on and forever in his mind she's stuck in that moment. But actually, of course, that woman is in the middle of doing something, it's a story. Maybe she's going away tomorrow to see her sister, but really before she goes she really must clean that grate out because she's been meaning to do it for ages. So I want to see space as a cut through the myriad stories in which we are all living at any one moment. Space and time become intimately connected.

**Nigel Warburton:** *If space isn't just an empty stage, that is it's somehow inhabited, it's imbued with all kinds of stories and memories and events, how can you study it?*

**Doreen Massey:** There's a million ways to answer that, but I think one way is to say that it raises some of the most acute questions. If time is the dimension in which things happen one after the other, it's the dimension of succession, then space is the dimension of things being, existing at the same time: of simultaneity. It's the dimension of multiplicity. We're sitting here, and it's somewhere around midday in London. Well, at this moment it is already night in the Far East, my friends in Latin America are probably just stirring and thinking about getting up, and space is that cut across all of those dimensions. Now what that means is that space is the dimension that presents us with the existence of the other; space is the dimension of multiplicity. It presents me with the existence of those friends in Latin America and that means it is space that presents us with the question of the social. And it presents us with the most fundamental of political of questions which is how are we going to live together.

**Nigel Warburton:** *So would it be fair to summarize that as you are saying that space isn't about physical locality so much as relations between human beings?*

**Doreen Massey:** Exactly. I mean, we don't think of time as being material, time is etherial and virtual and without materiality. Whereas space is material: it is the land out there. But there's a dimension of space that is equally abstract and just a dimension, so that's the way in which I want to think about it. Space concerns our relations with each other and in fact social space, I would say, is a product of our relations with each other, our connections with each other. So globalization, for instance, is a new geography constructed out of the relations we have with each other across the globe. And the most important thing that that raises if we are really thinking socially, is that all those relations are going to be filled with power. So what we have is a geography which is in a sense

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is the geography of power. The distribution of those relations mirrors the power relations within the society we have.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Could you give an example of that?*

**Doreen Massey:** Well, look at the city in which we're sitting, London. The power relations that run out from here around the world from that square mile and Canary Warf are extraordinary. London is a key node, if you like, within the globalisation that has taken place over the last thirty years, the financial globalisation – the dominance of finance within the organisation of the global economy. And London has been absolutely at the centre of that, not just that some of the most powerful institutions are there, and they are, but also in the sense that it was there that a lot of this neo-liberal economics within which we now live was imagined in the first place. And London has been part of the export, the imagination in the first place and then the export, of that way of thinking around the world. So its power is more than economic, it's also political and ideological.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Now you've given a description of power relations in the city, but how is that political?*

**Doreen Massey:** Well there's a number of ways in which I think that way of looking at globalisation can lead you into asking political questions which is more what I want to do. I mean, one thing is that it enables you, if you like, to map power relations. I mean I'm not against power – power is the ability to do things. What I do find that we should be critical of in the social sciences is the unequal distribution of power: power of some groups over others, power of some places over others. And so one might want to be critical and indeed I am very critical of the role of the city of London in its domination of economies and economic ideologies, if you like, around the rest of the world. So, one way in is a kind of empirical descriptive way of saying 'look this power is in globalisation at the moment to unequally distributed'. But there's another way, which I think relates back to the very way in which we think about space. The way in which we look at globalisation at the moment: it turns space into time. For instance, we are often using a terminology of we are 'developed' countries, the countries behind us as it were, are 'developing' and then you've got 'underdeveloped' countries. Now what that does is to convert contemporaneous difference between those countries into a single linear history. It's saying that that country over there – lets say it's Argentina a developing country, isn't a country at the same moment which is different, but it's a country which is following our historical path to become a 'developed' country like us. So in a sense we are denying the simultaneity, the multiplicity of space that I want to insist on, and turning all those differences into a single historical trajectory.

Now that has a lot of political effects, I mean the most important one is that it says that there is only one future and that's being a 'developed' country and so Argentina must follow the way we are going. Well, as it happens Argentina right now does not want to follow the way we are going, there is a lot of alternatives in Latin America that is saying 'we don't want to be 'developed' like you are developing. We want a different model which is more egalitarian, more communitarian, and so forth'. But that way of turning space into time, turning geography into history is a way of denying the possibility of doing something different. If we take space seriously as the dimension of multiplicity then it opens up politics to the possibility of alternatives.

**Nigel Warburton:** *So what you're saying is, is there is almost a Gestalt shift that you're trying to encourage by describing the world in a particular way that reveals to your readers and to the people who hear you a different way of understanding the same phenomena?*

**Doreen Massey:** Absolutely. If we took space seriously as a dimension that we create through our relations which are all full of power and as a dimension which presents us with the multiplicity of the world and refuse to align them all into one story of developments, then we really re-imagine the world in a different way, it presents us with different political questions, I think it opens up our minds.

**Nigel Warburton:** *You've criticised this notion of 'developing' countries and 'underdeveloped' countries and the implication that this is all in one trajectory towards 'developed' countries on the model that we in the West have. What can you do to persuade those who believe in that story? I mean how can you convince somebody who is in the grip of that ideology that they're wrong?*

**Doreen Massey:** It's a problem that a lot of us have, isn't it, that people get trapped in imaginations. It's a question of challenging common sense, and the hegemonic common sense at the moment includes that notion that we are stuck with this. And my stuff about space is one of the arguments that I hope will help to break us out of this feeling that we can't do anything about it. Now, the way you do that is you do little things like this: I talk all over the place, I write, I go to and work with countries that are trying to do something different.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Is it just a case that each society wants to project its version of reality onto the rest of the world?*

**Doreen Massey:** Yes. I'm not wanting to attribute a nefarious kind of intentions to people. I think I would say two things: one is that that way of thinking 'one road' if you like, is very classic to

modernism and modernity generally on left and right of the political spectrum. That there is a thing called 'development', there is a thing, one thing called 'progress': it's what we have called grand narratives, it was true of some versions of Marxism too that from feudalism we would go to capitalism, to socialism and to communism. But it's also highly political and very much a product of power relations – there is no doubt that the banks in the city and the leaders of the western world want the rest of the world precisely to follow and to be dominated by our model of the world. I mean, the USA and the UK are involved in absolutely trying to force other countries into what they call democracy, which usually means market societies. So there's both an overall Zeitgeist which I think is a hundred years old, and which in the social sciences we have criticised a lot, the whole critique of grand narratives. And there is a particular political dimension in which the powerful do want to dragoon the rest into following their path.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Are there other ways in which space and politics link together?*

**Doreen Massey:** There's loads of ways. For instance Occupy, do you remember Occupy London, that group of tents? I got a little bit involved, in fact I gave a couple of lectures in the university tent, and what struck me very strongly was how spatial their politics was. For one thing there was a huddle, a very unpretentious low huddle of tents between vast stone edifices of God and Mammon on each side of it. And almost the very unpretentiousness of those tents were an affront to the pretentiousness of Saint Paul's and the London Stock Exchange. The very physicality of that raised an impertinent finger to the complacent spaces of the Establishment and neo-liberalism. So there was something really symbolic I thought about the very placing of the thing itself and its material form. And even though it was so, so tiny, I think that's the reason it had to go. Somehow in it's very presence it was asking questions that were too deep to ask.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Occupy even by its name was about space as well, it's really interesting the way they chose the word, to occupy space.*

**Doreen Massey:** That's right. And what I think they did was to create a new kind of space. One of the things that neo-liberalism – if one can use that awful word - has done to our cities, is to privatise a lot of what was public space, and that's one of the things they occupied people, and lots of other people have complained about. And, of course, they tried to set up the camp outside the exchange and were told they couldn't because that square is in fact, although you would not know from looking at it, private space. Now the place where they eventually set up their camps was in a sense public space in the sense that it wasn't private: people passed through every day and all the rest of it. But that's public space in a very loose sense of the word. What I think Occupy did which fascinated me was to create public space in a more meaningful sense because they created a space, and people didn't just pass by each other on the way to work or shops or whatever, they talked, they



conversed, they argued. There was argument going on in the tent, there were people on the steps of Saint Paul's arguing with each other. While I was there people who had nothing to do with the occupation came up to me and asked questions and talked and it seemed to me that what they managed briefly to create there was a really public space, which means it was a place for the creation of a public, of politically engaged subjects if you like, of people who would talk to each other about the wider world. And it seemed to me that that was a real creation of a space of the kind that we need a lot more of. A space that brings us together to talk and to argue about the kind of future world we want. So it seems to me that they were invented both in their location and in the kind of space that they created.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Do you think geography as a subject can be a catalyst for this kind of activity?*

**Doreen Massey:** I think it can, I mean, the greater appreciation of geography and why it matters, and why in the end space is utterly political, seems to me to be very, very important. I mean, look at this country at the moment there's a huge divide between the north and the south of the country. OK, everybody knows that. What I would argue is that that matters, it changes the society in which we live: there are different cultures between north and south, there are different politics between north and south. But even more, it makes the inequality between the different people in this country even worse. So people in the south who happen to own houses are making money hand over fist, far more than they are making from their jobs just by the rise in the price of their houses. My friends in Liverpool and Manchester aren't making that money, and so the very division between north and south is increasing the inequality between us: geography matters. Or again, if you think about gender in that whole history of the division between private spaces and public places has been really crucial in the long history of gender difference between men and women, and the confinement for centuries of women to private space and men being the public figures in the public space.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Geography is usually thought of as one of the social sciences, I wonder if you think of yourself as a social scientist?*

**Doreen Massey:** I do, because that's the way in which I have worked within geography, and in fact a lot of my life has been spent trying to urge the social sciences to take geography more seriously. Geography is a very multidisciplinary discipline in that sense: we do engage a lot with sociologists and with economists. But one of the things that I like most about geography is the fact that it also includes people who are, if you like, natural scientists: people who study rivers and mountain formation and the Antarctic, and and, and... And I think there is within geography the possibility of bringing together the social and the natural sciences more than we have historically done, and there are vast differences between them, and the process is very hard, but we need to do that, I think. In an age which is faced by environmental problems such as we have, with climate change, with

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pollution questions, which are utterly social too, then I do think that the natural and the social sciences need to talk to each other more. And geography, maybe, is one of the places that could happen - one of the reasons that I love the discipline.

**Nigel Warburton:** *Doreen Massey, thank you very much.*

**Doreen Massey:** Thank you.

[ends]